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editorial

Oil shale's potential looms large, later

Industry and government are looking ahead to development of oil shale reserves, with production still decades away. Still, care must be taken now.

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With energy prices soaring, industry and government are finally getting serious about developing alternatives to crude oil. The push to develop oil shale reserves could significantly affect Colorado and its neighboring states - but not overnight. Despite provisions in the federal energy bill to stimulate shale development, experts agree that oil shale is a fuel source for the next generation, not this one.

Colorado, Utah and Wyoming may hold as many as 1.8 trillion barrels of oil shale, a sedimentary rock that when heated can produce petroleum-like liquid. In recent decades, attempts to turn U.S. shale into commercial fuel have failed.

A new report from the RAND Corp. says many woes that haunted oil shale in the past still exist. "An oil shale production level of 1 million barrels per day is probably more than 20 years in the future," RAND said. Its analysis took special note of oil shale's history of escalating cost estimates, but RAND also said oil shale someday should be part of a diversified U.S. energy portfolio.

RAND is skeptical of projects using the standard method of producing oil shale: mining the rock, heating it in above-ground industrial facilities and refining it. The commercial practicality of such processes is "questionable," RAND said. It was more supportive of a method being tested by Shell Oil Co. in northwest Colorado that involves heating the oil shale in the ground. Even so, Shell executives told The Post recently the company won't decide until near the end of the decade whether to commercially pursue the technology.

Shell hopes its slow roll-out and discussions with communities near its test site will avoid the economic shocks that hurt western Colorado in the 1980s. Such a collaborative approach is commendable.

Unfortunately, Washington isn't showing the same care. Administration efforts to rush crucial environmental studies in just 2 1/2 years likely will give short shrift to wildlife habitat and pollution concerns. Last week, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management began processing research leases on 19 tracts of public land, 10 in Colorado. It's foolish for federal officials to hurry the process and risk running roughshod over ecological and community concerns when oil shale won't be commercially viable for years or decades.

Oil shale development's side effects include using enormous quantities of water, disturbing wildlife habitat and worsening the Colorado River's already troublesome salt levels. (Shell says its method uses less water and energy and disturbs less land than other technologies.) And oil shale is a fossil fuel whose use could worsen global warming.

Oil shale's usefulness will inevitably be weighed against such alternatives as ethanol and hydrogen - potential fuels that also are many years from mainstream commercial use.